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Short-term anticoagulation after acute cardioversion of early-onset atrial fibrillation

Andrea Saglietto^{1*}, Gaetano Maria De Ferrari¹, Fiorenzo Gaita², Matteo Anselmino¹

¹ Division of Cardiology, Department of Medical Sciences, “Città della Salute e della Scienza di Torino” Hospital, University of Turin, Italy.

² Cardiovascular Department, Clinica Pinna Pintor, Policlinico di Monza, Turin, Italy.

* Corresponding author: Andrea Saglietto; address: corso Dogliotti 14, 10126, Torino, Italy; telephone number: (39)-0116709598; fax: (39)-0112369598; email address: andrea.saglietto@live.com

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1 **Abstract**

2 **Background.** Controversy exists regarding anticoagulation management following acute
3 cardioversion in patients with early-onset (< 48 hours) atrial fibrillation without class I guideline
4 indication for long-term oral anticoagulation (CHA2DS2-VASc 0-1).

5 **Methods and Results.** A random-effect meta-analysis of observational studies reporting 30-day
6 incidence of thromboembolic complications after cardioversion without post-procedural oral
7 anticoagulation therapy in patients at low-moderate thromboembolic risk (CHA2DS2-VASc 0-1)
8 was performed. Four studies were included, encompassing 3276 cardioversions. The analysis
9 revealed that the pooled risk of 30-day incidence of thromboembolic complications in this subset of
10 patients is low (0.10%, 95% confidence interval: 0.00-0.30%).

11 **Conclusions.** Given these data, considering the bleeding risk unavoidably conferred by OAT,
12 which is known to be higher in the first month from treatment onset, short-term anticoagulation
13 limited to 4 weeks post-cardioversion of early-onset (< 48 hours) atrial fibrillation in patients with
14 low-moderate risk of stroke (CHA2DS2-VASc 0-1) should be discouraged.

15

16 **Keywords**

17 Atrial fibrillation; Early-onset; Cardioversion; Oral Anticoagulation.

18

1 **Introduction**

2 Atrial fibrillation (AFib) cardioversion (CV) carries an inherent short-term increase in the risk of
3 clinical thromboembolism, both in acute and in elective settings ^{1,2}. In case of acute cardioversion
4 of early-onset (< 48 hours) AFib, oral anticoagulation therapy (OAT) apparently overrides this
5 extra-risk, reducing it to the baseline thromboembolic risk of AFib patients³. However, being
6 unanimously accepted that AFib patients not assuming OAT and presenting with high
7 thromboembolic risk (CHA₂DS₂-VASc score ≥ 2) should start anticoagulation as soon as possible
8 before CV and continue it long-term ^{4,5}, uncertainty regarding the best management in case of non-
9 anticoagulated individuals with low-moderate thromboembolic risk (CHA₂DS₂-VASc score 0-1)
10 exists. In fact, European guidelines ⁴ advocate peri-procedural anticoagulation followed by short-
11 term OAT (4 weeks) also in patients without stroke risk factors (CHA₂DS₂-VASc 0), while the
12 American guidelines ⁵ propose a less aggressive approach, suggesting that patients without
13 additional risk factors other than female sex (CHA₂DS₂-VASc 0 in male, CHA₂DS₂-VASc 1 in
14 female) do not necessarily need 4-week OAT post-CV. Due to this inconsistency, the aim of the
15 present study was to perform a meta-analysis of observational studies reporting the 30-day rate of
16 thromboembolic complications after acute cardioversion of early-onset AFib in patients at low-
17 moderate risk of stroke (CHA₂DS₂-VASc 0-1) not assuming OAT in the 4 weeks post-CV.

18

1 **Methods**

2 The present meta-analysis was performed in accordance to PRISMA guidelines ⁶.
3 PubMed/MEDLINE and Embase databases were searched for from their inceptions to 31st January
4 2020, using the following string: “anticoagulation AND (acute OR early OR recent) AND
5 cardioversion AND atrial fibrillation”. Two investigators (AS, MA) independently reviewed the
6 titles/abstracts and studies to determine their eligibility based on the inclusion criteria and extracted
7 all relevant outcomes of interest. Studies were eligible for inclusion if they reported the 30-day
8 incidence of thromboembolic complications after acute CV (both pharmacological or electrical) of
9 early-onset (< 48 hours) AFib in patients at low-moderate thromboembolic risk (CHA₂DS₂-VASc
10 0-1) not assuming OAT in the 4 weeks following CV. Each CV performed during study-specific
11 enrolling period was considered as an index observation, thus the number of CV may outweigh the
12 number of patients included (each patient may have performed more than one CV during the
13 investigated period).
14 Random-effect meta-analysis (inverse variance weighting) of 30-day incidence of thromboembolic
15 complications (please refer to Supplementary Table 1 for study-specific definition) was performed
16 using Freeman-Tukey double arcsine transformation and the results with the corresponding 95%
17 confidence interval (CI) were reported after back-transformation. Cochran I² test was used to
18 investigate heterogeneity. To deal with possible bias induced by the low number of studies included
19 and preponderance of a single study, sensitivity analyses using inverse variance meta-analysis with
20 different proportion transformation (logit transformation, arcsine transformation), as well as a
21 generalized linear mixed model (GLMM) meta-analysis, were also performed.
22 P values < 0.05 were considered statistically significant. Statistical analyses were performed with R
23 version 3.5.0 (R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria), using the package *meta* ⁷.

Results

Initial search yielded 276 results. According to the inclusion criteria, 4 studies reporting 30-day incidence of thromboembolic complications in a cohort of AFib patients with CHA₂DS₂-VASc 0-1 who underwent CV without anticoagulation in the 4 weeks following the procedure were finally included in the present meta-analysis^{3, 8-10} (Figure 1). Table 1 summarizes main study characteristics. Meta-analytic population mainly included young men (male sex percentage range: 55-65%; age range: 55-65 years), most often undergoing electrical CV (range 39-100%). In two of the included studies^{3, 8}, no periprocedural anticoagulation was adopted, differently from the other two studies^{9, 10}, where sole periprocedural anticoagulation with low molecular weight heparin (LMWH) was established in 100% and 62% of the patients, respectively.

Meta-analysis of 30-day incidence of thromboembolic complications revealed a pooled estimate of 0.10% (95% CI, 0.00-0.30%, I²: 0%), without significant heterogeneity. Funnel plot is reported in Figure 2. Sensitivity analyses using different meta-analytic approaches consistently produced similar results (Supplementary Figures 1-3).

1 Discussion

2 Current guidelines are contradictory in the recommendations regarding oral anticoagulation in
3 patients at low-moderate risk of stroke (CHA₂DS₂-VASc 0-1) undergoing acute CV for early-onset
4 (< 48 hours) AFib^{4, 5}. In particular, the role of short-term OAT (4 weeks post-CV) in patients
5 without indication of long-term OAT is controversial.

6 The present analysis indicates that 30-day risk of thromboembolic complications after CV in this
7 subset of patients (CHA₂DS₂-VASc 0-1, no short-term OAT) is as low as 0.1% (95% CI 0.0%-
8 0.3%). In addition, it is known that also just one month of OAT exposes the patient to an increased
9 risk of major bleedings.

10 Unfortunately, no specific data on 30-day major bleeding risk in this population exist, precluding
11 direct risk-to-benefit assessment of short-term anticoagulation. However, an indirect comparison
12 with other randomized or observational studies provides interesting insights. For example, three
13 randomized clinical trials have recently compared direct oral anticoagulants (rivaroxaban¹¹,
14 edoxaban¹², apixaban¹³) to heparin/vitamin K antagonist (VKA) in the setting of scheduled AFib
15 cardioversion, reporting major bleeding, following cardioversion, in the range of 0.3%-0.8%. In
16 particular, the EMANATE trial¹³, which compared apixaban to heparin/warfarin in AFib patients
17 with less than 48 h anticoagulation prior to randomization, describes a clinical setting and
18 population somewhat similar to the one investigated in this meta-analysis. Despite a slightly higher
19 thromboembolic risk (mean CHA₂DS₂-VASc 2.2), 62% of the enrolled patients were naïve to OAT,
20 and had a mean age of 64 years. In this trial, major bleeding following cardioversion occurred in
21 0.4% of patients treated with apixaban and 0.8% of those on heparin/VKA. In addition, recent real-
22 world data from a Danish national registry¹⁴ encompassing 54,321 patients with non-valvular AFib
23 who initiated OAT treatment (mean CHA₂DS₂-VASc 2.9; mean HAS-BLED 2.2) showed that
24 major bleeding incidence in the first 30 days of treatment was 0.82% (448 events/54,321 patients),
25 with nearly one fifth being intracranial bleeding (17%). If we compare the 30-day (0.82%) with the

1 1-year incidence (4.4%) of major bleedings in the latter real-world study, it is evident that the first
2 30 days after OAT initiation are the most vulnerable period in terms of major bleedings, thus the 4
3 week short-term anticoagulation following cardioversion in OAC-naïve patients seems a susceptible
4 period in terms of safety events.

5 To understand what these real-life bleeding data can imply in our meta-analytic population, should
6 this population be anticoagulated for 30 days after the cardioversion, some assumptions need to be
7 taken. First, due to the correlation between CHA₂DS₂-VASc and HAS-BLED¹⁵, we can assume
8 that HAS-BLED would range between 0-1 in the examined population. Second, based on the
9 estimation of bleeding risk in the original validation cohort of HAS-BLED score across the
10 different categories¹⁶, bleeding risk of patients with HAS-BLED 0-1 is reduced by 43% compared
11 to the risk of patients with HAS-BLED 2. Given these postulations, in case of short-term OAT, the
12 expected 30-day incidence of major bleedings in the present population, assuming low HAS-BLED
13 score (0-1), could be supposed 0.46%.

14 This means that, in order to reduce a 30-day 0.1% risk of a thromboembolic complication, initiation
15 of a short-term OAT might expose the patient to a 0.46% risk of experiencing a major bleeding
16 during the 4 weeks of therapy, with the risk of a potentially fatal intracranial bleeding projected at
17 0.08% (17% of major bleedings were intracranial bleedings in the study from Danish national
18 registry¹⁴) (Figure 3).

19 Although to be confirmed in large-scale studies, in our opinion, these data, together with those of
20 randomized and real-world data concerning the bleeding risk conferred by OAT, suggest that a
21 strategy of short-term anticoagulation after acute CV of early-onset AFib, in this specific setting of
22 patients, should be discouraged. The therapeutic choice following CV should be between no-OAT
23 strategy and initiation of a long-term OAT. A no-OAT strategy appears a reasonable choice, at least
24 in patients with CHA₂DS₂-VASc 0, possibly coupled with a timely cardioversion. In fact, based on
25 the Finnish Cardioversion registry (FinCV) data, if the cardioversion is performed by 12 hours after
26 symptoms onset a nearly four-fold reduction in thromboembolic risk at 30-days is reported in non-

1 anticoagulated patients ¹⁷.

2

3 **Limitations**

4 First, lack of complete sex subgroup data in the included studies precluded the possibility to
5 specifically analyze thromboembolic incidence in females without (CHA₂DS₂-VASc 1) and with a
6 single stroke risk factor other than gender (CHA₂DS₂-VASc 2), ¹⁸. Second, additional stroke risk
7 factors accounted for in the CHA₂DS₂-VASc score (other than gender) may have different impact in
8 terms of increased thromboembolic risk ¹⁹. The impossibility of performing meta-regression
9 analyses, due to low number of studies included (< 5) and the lack of complete baseline
10 characteristics of the subgroup of CHA₂DS₂-VASc 0-1 patients in most of the studies, unfortunately
11 limits the possibility to account for single variables. Finally, the fact that some patients in the
12 included studies received more than one cardioversion should be regarded as a possible confounder.

1 **Conclusion**

2 Thromboembolic complications following acute CV of early-onset AFib (< 48 hours) in patients
3 not assuming OAT and having low-moderate thromboembolic risk (CHA₂DS₂-VASc 0-1) are rare
4 (30-day incidence: 0.10%, 95% CI 0.00-0.30%). Given this, and the knowledge that the OAT-
5 associated major bleeding risk is higher in the first 30 days after treatment initiation, short-term
6 anticoagulation (4 weeks) following acute CV of early-onset AFib should be discouraged. At index
7 presentation the focus should be on a careful patient assessment in order to establish whether long-
8 term OAT is, instead, indicated.

1 **Acknowledgments**

2 None.

3

1 **Figure Legends**

2 **Figure 1. Study flow diagram.**

3

4 **Figure 2. Forest plot of 30-day incidence of thromboembolic complication following**
5 **cardioversion.**

6

7 **Figure 3. 30-day incidence of thromboembolic events and expected major bleedings**
8 **following cardioversion of early onset atrial fibrillation in patients with low-moderate**

9 **thromboembolic risk (a), with distribution of major bleeding subtypes (b). *Expected**

10 major bleeding incidence and major bleeding subtype distribution are based on data by

11 Lamberts ¹⁴. AFib: atrial fibrillation; TE: thromboembolic.

Tables

Table 1. Main characteristics of the included studies.

First author, year	Study population	Total number of patients	Patients included (number of cardioversions)	Mean Age (years)	Heart failure (%)	Type of cardioversion	Periprocedural anticoagulation
Gronberg 2016	Finnish CardioVersion (FinCV) registry	3143	nr (2772)	62.2 (CHA ₂ DS ₂ -VASc 0-1 patients: 54.3)	5%	Electrical 89.1%***; Pharmacological 10.9%***	None
Garg 2016	Cleveland Clinic Cardiac Electrophysiology Laboratory database	484	188 (220*)	62.8	27	Electrical 100%	None****
Tampieri 2018	Italian Emergency Department patients undergoing acute CV	157	157 (218)	55.2**	0**	Pharmacological 61%; Electrical 39%	LMWH 100%
Bonfanti 2018	Italian Emergency Department patients undergoing acute CV	490	66 (66)	61	nr	Electrical 100%	LMWH 81%

LMWH, Low Molecular Weight Heparin; nr, not reported

*Estimation based on the cardioversion-to-patient ratio in the entire cohort (1.17 cardioversions per patient)

** This study only included patients at low cardio-embolic risk

***Referred to CHA₂DS₂-VASc 0-1 patients, irrespective of anticoagulation status

****Comprised cardioversions performed either without anticoagulation or on warfarin with INR<1.5.

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